



**GROWING MINOR FOOTBALL IN
SASKATCHEWAN**

A REPORT BY

GENE MAKOWSKY



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The attached documents are the culmination of a four month project by Gene Makowsky who was contracted by the Ministry of Tourism, Parks, Culture and Sport to review the current state of minor football in the province. The focus of the project is to provide information on the components of running a successful football program while highlighting barriers that prevent participation and providing recommendations on how to overcome those barriers. Increased participation in existing and new minor football programs is anticipated as a result of Mr. Makowsky's involvement with the project.

During the course of the project Mr. Makowsky travelled to a number of communities around the province and invited input from numerous individuals involved with various minor football programs.

Information was gathered on a number of pertinent topics including:

- components and characteristics of running a successful program;
- barriers to advancing the sport;
- how to stimulate interest in developing a program;
- challenges facing smaller communities;
- challenges facing inner city youth; and,
- how the popularity of the Saskatchewan Roughriders can help grow minor football.

The final report contains the findings from these interviews and research along with recommendations for moving forward. A number of recommendations have been received and will be reviewed by ministry officials over the coming months. Where appropriate, next steps will be developed in collaboration with various stakeholders mentioned in the report.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Christine Tell". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Christine Tell
Minister of Tourism, Parks,
Culture and Sport

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By Gene Makowsky
commissioned by the Government of Saskatchewan

PREAMBLE

Sports have played a large role in the history of our province. Many sports and activities have provided us with reasons to cheer and play with our families and friends through each generation. No sport has infected us with this sense of community and belonging to the extent that football has. With the start of the Saskatchewan Roughriders in 1910, along with the various football leagues that have started and flourished from its example, the football experience has a hold on us unlike anything else. From LaRonge to Estevan, Maple Creek to Hudson Bay, the passion for the game more than anything else gives us a “distinct society” that is not found anywhere else.

Minor tackle football is an established entity in Saskatchewan and in the last five years has grown significantly. The benefits to the youth of our province cannot be measured in dollars, wins or touchdowns but rather in belonging, character, teamwork, dedication, commitment, sense of community and more. Football is a unique sport in that it relies on all types of athletes for the various positions, making it appealing to a broad segment of the population. Having set plays makes it imperative that the athlete rely on mental competencies while performing a physical task in a continually changing environment. Young athletes enjoy the physical contact that is in the game. That said there are still communities that have not fielded a minor football team and the current leagues face some significant hurdles. This report will examine the state of minor football in Saskatchewan, give some recommendations that will help grow the sport and will show communities that do not have football how to start up a team/league of their own.

There are three basic stages that minor tackle football is at within Saskatchewan. First are the established leagues that are essentially self-sufficient. The next include those that are relatively new or established leagues that are experiencing some significant changes in structure. The third group involves communities that see the need for minor football and want to initiate the sport in their community.

Regina Minor Football (RMF) is one of the best run minor football program in Canada. Its numbers have continually climbed since incorporating as Regina Minor Football 2000 Inc. In 2007, the league registered 1504 Regina kids, 88 from Weyburn, 40 from Notre Dame and 40 from Lumsden. Under the leadership of President Kelly Hamilton, Vice President Len Antonini and its board of directors, the RMF is business-like in its approach. It has audited financial statements and an elected board. Most of the board members do not have children in the league so there are no “hidden agendas”. They have game day people in place to ensure that everyone plays and that coaches do not abuse referees. A key focus for this well run organization is the idea that everyone plays and there are no cuts. This is the main reason for the large growth RMF has experienced. The ‘12 on - 12 off’ rule ensures that all people on the 30 man roster see the field (the best eight athletes don’t stay on the field all day while some kids sit on the bench which had happened in the past). The use of “floating zones” ensures there are no cuts - if a kid

pays his registration he will play in the fall. This takes the pressure off the kids and allows them to learn the game and simply have fun. It is truly a developmental/participation league. In fact the league's motto is "it's fair, it's fun, it's football." This leads to word of mouth among kids which is RMF's biggest advertiser. Once kids come out they realize football is a great sport. Football really sells itself.

Moose Jaw minor football has also seen an increase of participants the last few years. They had 378 players register in 2007 which included a Bantam team from Assiniboia. Like Regina, they are a well organized league that has a participation and fun mantra. They are also essentially self-sufficient which means they have enough cash on hand to deal with spikes in registrations as they occur. Both Regina and Moose Jaw expect an increase in registrations with the success of the Roughriders. The major need for these organizations is for capital improvements to meet the need of growing enrollments.

FACILITIES

With increasing participation, the Regina league is in need of an artificial turf facility. There are a limited number of fields available and field time has decreased recently as the Roughriders now use Mosaic Stadium to practice on instead of the practice field. The University of Regina has a new field to use but rent is quite high.

Turf fields are superior to natural grass in that they are able to be used much more. There is no down time for maintenance (costs are also dramatically decreased) and games are not lost to rain. Playing on natural turf during or after a rain chews up the turf making it almost unplayable for the rest of the season. This causes logistical nightmares (though RMF deals with them very well) in rescheduling dozens of games. An already short football season is further reduced because of weather problems. This situation would be eliminated with artificial turf. Soccer would be able to use the facility from April until August.

Recently installed fields in Saskatchewan received limited financial support from the previous provincial government. The SaskTel indoor-outdoor soccer facility received under 20 percent from crown corporation grants. The Rams field was supported by the university and the city. The Huskies were supported by the corporate community and private donations. Mosaic stadium turf was paid for by the Riders and the city. It is very difficult to make a facility like this economically viable if debentures are used to fund it given our climate. If financed this way the rental costs would price everyone out of the market.

Contrast what has happened here to the facility in Spruce Grove, Alberta. They are putting in two turf fields, a clubhouse and lights. The total 14 million dollar cost is being split between the city and province.

Moose Jaw is in need of some infrastructure improvements including a bigger building for equipment storage and a scorer's booth.

Weyburn could use another practice field with lights as they now split a field with the high school team and as days shorten they run out of practice time.

RECOMMENDATION - The provincial and municipal governments develop capital funding programs that would be eligible to support new/upgraded minor football facilities where needed.

PROGRAMMING AND EQUIPMENT

In communities the size of Moose Jaw it is much easier to make teams as there is not a distance factor like in Regina or Saskatoon. They simply put all registered players into a pool and field equal teams.

In the large centers, zones are used to ensure a player does not have to go across town to practice.

In Saskatoon, as in most other places around the country, they have strict zones carved into the city. This zone or club system works fine if there are only 36 players (the league maximum per roster) who come out in each area. Unfortunately in Saskatoon there has been dozens more kids who want to play in some zones but there are only so many sets of equipment per zone. A kid being cut at 11 years old is something that should never happen in this province. Not only is this bad for football but the kid walks away with bad feelings toward himself and sports in general. Until about 10 years ago there were only four minor teams in one division run by one person from the Saskatoon Kinsmen Club. They have steadily been building their program and now have a board of directors with good people in place. The league added two teams last year bringing the total to 15 teams in two divisions. This includes a Bantam team in Prince Albert and a Pee Wee and Bantam team in Martensville. Their total numbers are 491 plus 40 in Prince Albert. The Kinsmen Football League (KFL) plans to expand next year adding Warman and a Pee Wee team in Prince Albert.

On the surface these numbers look paltry compared to Regina but their age divisions are different. First, they do not run an Atom division. Their belief is that football is too complex a sport for it to be beneficial at that age group. The other factor is that Saskatoon has junior and senior football in its high school programs whereas Regina only has senior football. Minor football does the junior (grade nine and ten) aged kids. This year Saskatoon is trying the Regina model in its Pee Wee division (no cut). They are concerned about being able to buy enough equipment if there is a large spike in registrations. It appears the Kinsmen will contribute most of the funding. The KFL is also desperately in need of an equipment facility to store their equipment. Storage and equipment distribution is not ideal in the current situation. Equipment is locked away in boxes at a storage place and is not organized properly. This makes proper maintenance a problem during the off-season. Neither the province nor the crowns have any unused warehouse space in Saskatoon at this time which might be available to help in this regard.

Saskatoon has the biggest potential for growth of minor football in the province.

Mid-sized communities are the next group of football centers. Those starting minor programs in the past five years include Swift Current, Prince Albert, Yorkton and most recently, Estevan are in this category.

The Swift Current Shaw minor football league has only played two seasons but had 283 participants last season. They have several key football people on their board and the business community has really stepped up to help with the start-up costs. Every year they have a spring clinic for the kids (participants don't wear pads). Roughrider players and elite team coaches conduct the clinic which helps to promote the game. Swift Current is another example that if you have a strong, well organized league, players will come.

Prince Albert started a Bantam team two seasons ago after a 25+ year hiatus. 40 players enrolled. This year, as mentioned above, they will start a Pee Wee team that will compete in the Saskatoon KFL. Service clubs and businesses again have helped with dollars for equipment. Prince Albert could eventually get to a size where it could be a regional center for a northern league.

Estevan is planning on joining the football fraternity this year. They had about 200 kids register which is an exciting development as this is the first time tackle football has been attempted in the city. They plan on playing in the RMF with two Atom, two Pee Wee, and one Bantam team. This example shows that there does not need to be a strong high school tradition for a minor program to happen. Their board has secured equipment funding from SGI and Regina minor football is providing the rest with a three year payment plan. Their big issues, besides coaching, will be transport costs to Regina and finding a suitable field to play on this fall. The community has pitched in a field but it won't be ready until next season.

Estevan and Weyburn could eventually join and form a southeast league that could include Stoughton, Carlyle and Moosomin.

Yorkton has also had support from the Kinsmen to go along with an annual fundraising dinner "Football Night in Canada". They have raised enough money to keep player fees at \$30. (If there is a better deal out there, please let me know!). Yorkton plays six man football in May and June. This was done because it fit in better with the sports calendar as well as the fact that there are only a few available coaches who are already involved with the high school team in the fall. High school players are encouraged to come and help out the minor kids in the spring which helps to mentor these kids as future coaches and allows them to "give back" right away to the football community. They decided to play six man (the only place in Canada where football is played six per side is in Saskatchewan) so surrounding communities could join and it is much easier to transport the teams. There is only one age division (11 and 12 years olds) with four teams in Yorkton (81 players), and others in Canora, Preeceville, and Kelvington. Communities like Melville, Esterhazy and Kamsack are interested in playing this year.

There are a few places that have kids in this age division such as Rosetown, Nipawin, and Carrot River that do not have a league to play in but just practice the fundamentals and

have a jamboree or exhibition game at the end of the year. They have the same coaches as the Grade 9-12 team and use some of the same equipment but practice at different times of day. These communities are great examples that you do not need a big fancy league to play minor ball. They have adapted the traditional game to fit what is best for their kids and the human resources available. These places prove that a minor football team can work almost anywhere in the province.

Football is an expensive sport to start from scratch. The fact that football leagues have a history of supplying all of the equipment is great for the individual players but it is a significant obstacle to overcome for new teams and leagues. It costs roughly \$350 to outfit a bantam aged player (a little less for younger age groups) with equipment and uniforms. When you consider that properly used and maintained equipment should last 10 years, the costs amortized over that span become very reasonable. Still, the costs to get started can seem daunting. This is a significant disincentive for a community to start a football program.

RECOMMENDATION - A grant be made available to new leagues/teams to help cover a portion of the initial up-front costs of equipment based on the number of registered participants.

Another hurdle potential football teams face in smaller centers is opposition from other established sports who fear they may take away athletes, with hockey having a virtual monopoly on potential participants. This can lead to dissension and a split in the community which is the opposite pull sports are supposed to have. People who want to start football have to live in the community so this can be a delicate situation.

COACHING

There are inroads being made with these minor programs to create a "football culture" but it is a struggle to find enough qualified coaches. There are a lot of self professed football experts in our province but very few actually have the technical expertise to coach it safely and effectively.

Although it may not always look like it, football is a very technical sport with many different specific positions. It can be overwhelming for a first time coach to teach or even organize a football team. Many people have said they think having minor ball would be a good idea for their community but "who will look after the football side?" If a few key people in each town can be trained and catch the "football bug" then they can be leaders in creating a climate for football.

Football Saskatchewan does a great job of running a coaches clinic in April every year in Regina or Saskatoon. However this clinic is geared more toward elite team coaches or high school coaches with many years of experience. Each presenter only gets an hour or so and just scratches the surface of their topic. It can also be a lot to ask a new coach to give up his weekend and cover significant travel cost to attend this clinic. One way to overcome this problem is for Football Sask to bring one or two experts in to each community for one day clinics to explain in detail a specific football topic.

For example, an experienced coach could travel to Swift Current one day in March and go over practice planning in the morning session. After lunch he could explain form tackling and linebacker drills. Elite coaches and Roughrider players and coaches could be the resources for these clinics. There should be no cost to the potential coaches for this clinic.

RECOMMENDATION - The football community should investigate ways to increase the recruitment and retention of coaches.

OFFICIALS

It is also tough finding qualified officials, especially outside of Regina and Saskatoon. Most other sports will tell you this same story. This is a factor that results in some smaller communities deciding to drive long distances to play in a city league.

There are many reasons why it is tough to keep referees. First and foremost is the respect factor or lack thereof. Although not as bad as in other sports, young officials do quit because of verbal abuse they receive from coaches and parents. They figure it is not worth it for the money they are making or for any dollar amount in some cases. (If broken down in per hour terms referees make just over minimum wage at the minor level) Players seeing a coach "losing it" at an official makes them think it is alright for them to do it. How many of these kids will want to be an official down the road?

If you are looking to become an official in a sport, football is a tough sell in rural Saskatchewan. The season is short and there are a limited number of games to officiate which means there is little money to be made.

Another factor working against recruitment of football officials is the rulebook. It is difficult to master as there are many different types of officials with corresponding rules to learn (side judge, umpire, linesman, head ref). Again football is a very technical sport.

Some officials see they are not being promoted and lose interest and others do not like to be judged and corrected by the head of officials. One way to keep referees is to show them there is a chance for advancement. Just like a player wants to improve himself and move to the next level, a referee wants to do the same. At the higher levels of football referees are asked to travel to other centers to ensure impartiality in games. This is happening less because budgets are being squeezed with higher travel costs. This incentive is one of the few available to refs so less of it may mean less interest in continuing as an official. Regina has game day supervisors making sure every kid plays but also ensuring there are no disrespectful actions against refs. This cooperation between the two groups is key in making it a fun and developmental league for both players and officials.

RECOMMENDATION - The football community should investigate ways to increase the recruitment and retention of officials. Initiatives that promote respect of officials should be a priority.

Football Saskatchewan is the driving force for amateur football in the province. Their mandate is to grow the sport of football in the province by increasing participation levels, upgrading the development of players, coaches and referees, making safety a top priority and providing support for provincial and national competitions. Since 2004 membership has increased by 36 percent and they do not expect to slow anytime soon, especially with the recent success of the Roughriders.

However, annual funding they receive from Sask Sport has stayed fairly stagnant. Their budget in 2000 was \$396,000 and this year is \$655,000. They have continually added programs in the province and this will happen again next year when they will join the national under 17 championship. The difference between grant money from Sask Sport and what they spend is made up through self help fundraising and membership fees. They charge their member teams \$100 in return for insurance coverage, access to resources, clinics, provincials etc. Teams also get back a \$250 membership assistance program (MAP) grant from Sask Sport for registering.

To their credit Football Sask has done everything to keep their fees low to ensure that costs to players are kept as low as possible. Manitoba has a significantly higher fee structure while running similar programs. Football Sask is in a tough spot in terms of fundraising in that it does not want to step on the toes of the elite programs who conduct extensive funding projects to stay afloat.

On top of that there are only two paid individuals in the organization who simply do not have extra time to find dollars. These two individuals, Jeff Yausie and Mike Thomas, do outstanding work with the resources they have. Alberta and Manitoba have at least one more employee on their staff and hire seasonal employees during peak times, but do not offer more programs or have larger memberships than we do.

RECOMMENDATION - In order to ensure that current and future programs (including the ones brought forward in this report) are properly looked after in Saskatchewan, the province and Sask Sport should review present program guidelines within the sport system to ensure they are meeting the needs of Football Saskatchewan and all provincial sport organizations.

SPECIAL PROJECTS

The bantam Lakers football team is a special team that plays in the RMF. The roster for this "inner-city" team is comprised of kids who live in the north central area of Regina or who are under the care of the Ranch Ehrlo Society. A team of this nature is unique in Saskatchewan, if not all of Canada. Places like Moose Jaw and Saskatoon have disadvantaged kids on their teams, but not all together on one team.

If not for this team and the effort of individuals like Brandon Brooks and Cory Matthews most of these kids would not have access to the great game of football and all the personal benefits derived from sport. Kids in these areas have many challenges to overcome and football can help them do it. The football field can be a place of solace for

a couple of hours when you are going through tough times. Many of these kids have been treated so poorly that they lose hope and no longer care. Being on a team gives them something to care about and feel a part of. As stated earlier it takes all kinds of players on a football team and every one of them must contribute. The football field is also an ideal place to release feelings of anger and frustration.

In any organization, often the little things make a big difference. For these kids that notion is greatly magnified. When you have very little to begin with a small thing such as a team jacket, a nice uniform, or new cleats can make a big difference. These kids will benefit from the recognition that these little things can give them. An added benefit to these clothing items is that it brands the players in non-gang colors. Anytime you can show the youth there are options other than belonging to a gang it is good for the community.

The example set by the Lakers can hopefully be copied in the Atom and Pee Wee divisions in north central, and in Saskatoon once they become a no-cut league.

One way to expose children to the game of football and sports in general would be the development of a traveling football clinic. This could be accomplished with the purchase of 60 sets of equipment and a trailer to transport it to various clinics around the province. This road show could have one or two day camps in areas that do not have football and would provide prospective players with a taste of the great game of football. These areas could include inner city and reserves. Not only would it give kids a day of fun but it may be the spark to get minor ball going in that community. Roughrider players could help at these camps to raise its profile. This potential program is another reason Football Sask needs another employee. It makes no sense to have this equipment if there is no one to run the camps.

Many of the children (or their parents) in the inner city have limited understanding of the sports and culture programs that are available to them. Sask Sport should expand their "Dream Broker" pilot project, happening in Regina, to other areas of the province with similar needs. In partnership with school boards, people are hired to give guidance in elementary community schools. Their job is to meet with children age 8-14 to see what programs are of interest to them. They then help the family of the student register and find funding (usually through Kidsport). Essentially they address any barriers to participation. If a kid fails to show up for a scheduled event the counselor investigates the reasons why.

In 2007, at Sacred Heart School in Regina, 210 of 320 kids eligible under this program participated in some form of event.

RECOMMENDATION – Conduct a review of current grant programs available from government and non government agencies and develop a list of potential funding sources to be made available to community sport organizations. Ensure grant programs are available that meet the needs of inner city sport initiatives.

The adoption of all of these recommendations would have a positive impact for the great sport of football and for underprivileged kids in our province. In this case a relatively small amount of money could leverage a great deal of impact.

The great thing about minor football in Saskatchewan is that it has gone to a participation model rather than a win at all costs game. There is very little running up the score and teams are picked as evenly as possible. The attitude "that my kid is going pro" or to a major US college is not tolerated. Football is just fun. And the season actually does end.

Some sports start to funnel their kids onto elite teams at eight years old and keep them in different programs all year round. Many studies have been shown that at younger ages kids should be trying a variety of sports because they involve different motor skills and energy systems. This exposure to multiple sports helps make better athletes and football is definitely a sport that should be offered in most communities.

Another great reason to help out football is the absolutely outstanding contributions coaches and administrators have made to the youth of Saskatchewan. These people are the best of the best that society has to offer. As with anything in life, if you have committed, quality people involved, there is a good chance of being successful and football is blessed with many of them. It is one thing to get involved when your kids are in the sport (and that is great) but volunteering hundreds of hours when you don't have a son or daughter involved is really something special. When you hear of examples like Len Antonini, VP of RMF, donating in excess of 160 hours last year helping selflessly in getting teams started in Regina and surrounding area; and Kelly Bowers (retired teacher with 30+ years of coaching) taking on the presidency of the KFL; and Marco Ricci (former Ram player) starting up minor ball in Estevan; and Brandon Brooks (coach of the Lakers) who bought a bigger vehicle so he could transport more kids to practice; you cannot help but get inspired. There are many more examples but these are the type of people that make Saskatchewan such a great place to live and play.

CONSIDERATIONS

There are a few miscellaneous ideas that the province could consider which would help football and sports in general.

First, Alberta and Ontario have gone to a midget football league that plays in the spring for kids who are in Grade 10 and 11. Our elite coaches are concerned that our players could fall behind these kids who now have much more playing time. These teams would be in the larger centers of the province. They could also travel to play each other and have a provincial final at the end of the year. Finding coaches would not be as difficult because is not during the traditional fall season. This would also give referees a chance to work more games.

Provincial championships could also be considered for younger divisions between communities that have similar age and weight restrictions. Holding these championships at Mosaic Stadium might be an option and would provide added excitement for the young athletes.

Secondly, the province should explore ways to help larger centers with the cost of turf fields. For the reasons mentioned earlier and to encourage pride in their communities

Prince Albert, Swift Current, Moose Jaw, Yorkton and Gordie Howe bowl in Saskatoon would look good with synthetic playing surfaces.

Lastly, the finance department recently made an inspired decision to give tax breaks to parents whose children are involved in sports. Maybe something could be done in this manner for coaches and administrators without whom many teams and leagues would not operate.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1 - The provincial and municipal governments develop capital funding programs that would be eligible to support new/upgraded minor football facilities where needed.

RECOMMENDATION 2 - A grant be made available to new leagues/teams to help cover a portion of the initial up-front costs of equipment based on the number of registered participants.

RECOMMENDATION 3 - The football community should investigate ways to increase the recruitment and retention of coaches.

RECOMMENDATION 4 - The football community should investigate ways to increase the recruitment and retention of officials. Initiatives that promote respect of officials should be a priority.

RECOMMENDATION 5 - In order to ensure that current and future programs (including the ones brought forward in this report) are properly looked after in Saskatchewan, the province and Sask Sport should review present program guidelines within the sport system to ensure they are meeting the needs of Football Saskatchewan and all provincial sport organizations.

RECOMMENDATION 6 – Conduct a review of current grant programs available from government and non government agencies and develop a list of potential funding sources to be made available to community sport organizations. Ensure grant programs are available that meet the needs of inner city sport initiatives.

Starting a Minor Football Program in Saskatchewan

This document is meant to give information about how to start a minor tackle football program. Football is alive and well in Saskatchewan and there are many fine leagues that are great examples of how football can work in every kind of community. Each place is of course unique with its own logistics but there are some common characteristics that can be learned so each prospective community does not have to "re-invent the wheel".

Football in Saskatchewan

By joining the football fraternity you can become a part of the long and storied football tradition in Saskatchewan. Most Canadians outside the province think of the Roughriders when they think about sports in our province. It is true that they are the most closely watched and scrutinized team, but there are many successful amateur programs throughout the province at many levels. There are two university programs, two junior teams, many high school teams and leagues that play the traditional 12 man but also those that play nine man and six man depending on the size of their community. Many of these minor football leagues have participants as young as nine years old. There are also several touch football leagues that can be played from ages eight to eighty.

Why Play Football?

There are many benefits to organized sports for youth in our society. It gives kids a chance to have fun, meet friends, to set and achieve goals, learn motor skills, commit to a common goal, stay in shape in an increasingly sedentary society, being exposed to role models, taking pride in their community and on and on. The value of sports is well documented.

Football has some unique characteristics that are not necessarily found in other sports. First, football is the ultimate team game. For a completed pass to occur, *everybody* on offence has to successfully do their job. Believing in your team mates and working together with them is critical. Next, football combines physical and mental aspects like no other sport. With set plays, you have to know where (the mental) you are going in a continually changing environment and how (the physical) you can execute the assigned task. Football requires a broad range of athletic types. Nearly all kids can find a position at which they can excel. For those kids who like to be physical there are certain positions where you get to hit on every play. This is a constructive way to be aggressive or release feelings of anger. Football is a very exciting game that a whole community will get behind once they begin to understand it. Tackle football is a great game and will benefit any community that has it as a part of their sports calendar. A well run program can make a huge difference for all participants whether it be in the classroom or at home.

High school coaches are finding that it is a major benefit to have a minor program as a feeder system. These athletes come into high school knowing all the basics of football

techniques and terminology so the coach can use valuable practice time on higher level competencies. Communities that run a minor ball program have a competitive advantage over those that do not.

Getting Started

Starting a football team from scratch can seem like a daunting task, especially if you have no football background. The first thing you should do is form a committee of like minded people who are committed to having football in your community. Those with some previous football experience should be recruited early in the process. Once this committee is formed a mission statement can be developed. This will help all members of the group to focus on a common purpose. At the minor level this should include some aspect of developing individuals in a team setting with a safe and fun environment. It is also important to establish some guidelines and expectations for parents when it comes to respecting and supporting referees and coaches.

After a mission statement has been established your prospective team/league should decide what type of football they will play; six a side, nine a side or 12 a side. In communities with few human resources six man ball is an excellent option. Fewer coaches are needed and 15 players are all that is required. There is less equipment to buy and fewer players to transport if traveling is required. It can be argued that at the developmental level six man is a better game as there is less cognitive processing required and therefore kids learn the fundamentals more.

The other part of this equation is what age levels your league will have. Football in Saskatchewan currently has three age divisions before high school begins. Atom is the youngest group with nine and 10 year olds, Pee Wee is next with 11 and 12 year olds and Bantam is the oldest with 13 and 14 year olds. There are variations of these divisions around the province.

Deciding which age divisions you will use or style of football depends on the number of prospective players you have in each community. In smaller communities a sampling could be done by informal discussions. A larger center would need to have an information night or advertise in school newsletters ahead of a registration night to gauge numbers. At the information night you could invite kids to a gymnasium (probably will have to be done during February) and run them through some simple football drills to show them what they will be doing if they join. Having special guests such as Roughrider players might help with exposure. Doing an interview in the local paper or radio station is a good way to get your message out to the public helping to create some excitement about football starting in the community. Most leagues have registrations well ahead of the fall season, usually in late May or early June, so there is enough time to get coaches and equipment in order.

If your program is close to an existing center with minor ball it is likely you would join that league so these decisions are made for you. Joining an existing league can save you

time as this league likely has a place to play as well as referees and existing equipment to use. Some teams in Saskatchewan travel nearly two hours to play games in a larger center.

The on field parameters also have to be established. Most leagues have rules that limit roster size and use a 12 on - 12 off system (a player can not play both defence and offence). This rule ensures that everyone on the team gets an opportunity to use the skills they have learned in practice. Before this rule coaches tended to keep their top players on the field the whole game while less skilled players sat on the bench. In a developmental league this should not happen.

The kicking game is another item for the committee to discuss. Is there a benefit to a kicking game, especially at the Atom level? It is difficult to find kids who can long snap and kick the ball effectively at this age. It also means more playbook to memorize.

Weight limits have had a lively debate at the minor level all over Canada. One side of the argument believes that part of the appeal of football is that all sizes can find a position to play. The other side says that safety is the most important issue and that size differences must be regulated rather than using age categories as the only determinant. Some leagues have compromised and said that only ball carriers have weight restrictions. This is an issue your committee will have to decide.

Also of concern, is the idea of kids using unsafe methods to “make weight”.

Your mission statement may help with this. Again, if you are joining an existing league you will likely have to work within their rules.

At this beginning stage it is a good idea to get in touch with Football Saskatchewan. They are the provincial sport governing body responsible for growth and development of amateur football. They would be happy to answer any questions regarding the development of a new program and could provide contact numbers for football teams and leagues in your area.

Football Sask does charge a registration fee (currently \$100) for each team. This membership fee does provide a number of benefits including the opportunity to apply for a membership assistance program grant, \$5 million in liability protection, resource material, discounts, equipment inspections, and fundraising initiatives. They can be contacted in the northern part of the province in Saskatoon at 975-0827 or the southern part in Regina at 780-9239. Their website is www.footballsaskatchewan.ca.

Talking to other fall sports before you make a formal announcement about starting football is also a good idea, especially if you are from a smaller community. There are only so many athletes to go around so existing groups can feel threatened by football and the people it will attract. Meeting and working with other sports will help ease these

fears and avoid dissention within the community. Try to come up with a way to schedule around each activity. For example: if a player wants to play football and hockey in the fall, he/she can go to football practice first and then hockey later. Games would take precedence over a practice etc. Remind the hockey coach that he has the players from October through April so they should be flexible for a couple of weeks at the beginning of their season.

If there are limited playing fields, come up with a preliminary schedule with the other sports to make sure you have adequate access. Football at this level usually has four - two hour practices per week followed by a game that should have a two hour time slot. The season traditionally goes from mid-August to mid-October.

Myths

In communities that have never had football, you need to sell the game. The biggest obstacle to overcome in getting people to buy in is the "injury myth". When people watch football on television they see slow motion replays of player's gruesome injuries and think this happens all the time. In reality there are no more injuries in football than any other contact sport. At the minor level, the number and severity of injuries are even less. In fact, a child is far more likely to need medical attention from riding a bike than playing a football game. It is a contact sport so cuts and bruises will occur but most kids actually enjoy these "war wounds". There are aspects of the game that can be regulated to help reduce the injury factor including proper fitting equipment, proper coaching techniques and quality referees.

Another myth is that tackle football is not for girls. At the minor level age groups there is no physical advantage for boys. Remember that football requires a diversity of athletes and girls can fall into this category. There is no reason a girl cannot compete equally with boys in minor tackle football.

Equipment

One of the many great things about football is that all the equipment is supplied to the players as part of their registration fees. This can be welcome news to parents who do not have to buy new pads every year for growing kids. The only item traditionally supplied by the players is cleats. Once you know the number of kids you have registered for the upcoming season you can order their equipment. If you are joining an existing league check with them as they may have extra equipment to rent or they may use their expertise to help with your purchase. If you decide to do it alone you can expect to budget approximately \$350 per player for equipment and uniforms. This may seem like a large cost (and initially it is) but when you consider well maintained equipment can last for ten years or more the amortized amount becomes a bargain.

If there is not a high school program in your area remember that extra equipment such as yardage chains, goalpost pads, blocking bags etc. will have to be purchased.

If you have enough kids for more than one team make sure you order the same color helmets for all of your programs (including high school) so that there is easy exchange of equipment between teams. Your teams will not look good if there are different colored helmets on a team.

Having good looking uniforms is also important as you want the kids to take pride in their team and community. This is easier when uniforms are of good quality and fit properly.

Having quality equipment, particularly helmets and shoulder pads, is a big part of player safety and this is an area you should never under budget. However, most suppliers will have junior style pads that are much less expensive that will be more than adequate. You do not need \$500 helmets and \$400 shoulder pads like pro teams have.

You will also need to order a few extra sets of equipment as not every kid will have the same body measurements. Some gear may break and it could take several days to replace. There are several Canadian sports equipment companies that can supply you with everything you will need including Big Kahuna, Team Skyline, and Olympian Sports. There are also dozens more in the States. Contact several (all have online shopping) to get the right package and best price for you. Football Saskatchewan can be a valuable resource for your equipment decisions.

Finding a storage place for your equipment is also necessary for the off-season. This space should be heated as air cushions and plastic shells of helmets should not be exposed to long periods of freezing conditions. This space should be accessible to do periodic maintenance, lend equipment for various football camps, and to hand out and take back the equipment during the season.

Fundraising

Now that you have ordered your equipment and uniforms all you have to do is pay for it. This may seem like an insurmountable task but where there is a will there is a way. Part of your committee should be in charge of finance. It is important that you keep detailed financial statements for transparency and year to year budgeting. These statements are required if you are applying for support from various organizations or if you become a non-profit organization.

You should register with Saskatchewan Justice for non-profit status. This can be done by requesting an Incorporation Kit from the Corporations Branch of Saskatchewan Justice. By doing so you will bring legitimacy to your program because of the accountability rules you will have to abide by. In order to issue tax receipts as part of your fundraiser, you will have to apply to Sask Sport under the National Sport Trust Fund. If successful, you will be able to issue tax receipts to donors which will help in your fundraising efforts.

Charging fees for kids to play is one way to raise some money. Generally teams/leagues have done all they can to keep football as inexpensive as possible. If you charge too much it may be out of the reach of some families. Player fees in the large cities are around \$200 each year and in smaller centers about \$150. Fees are normally used to run the league and to help raise a reserve fund to access in case there are years with a spike in players. If possible you want to avoid using fees for start-up costs. Once you get on your feet a good reserve would be enough to cover one year of normal expenses.

Ways to raise money are only limited by your imagination. Here are some ideas:

1. Hold a kick-off banquet in your community:

This will help give you some exposure as well as make you some cash. Contact businesses to buy corporate tables and donate auction items. Sports memorabilia is a great seller at a sports themed dinner. There are many collectibles to be found online (a few will give discounts to non-profits). Talk to the hockey people in your area as they usually know somebody who can get an item from an NHL team. The Roughriders would also be a good source for sporting items to auction as well as providing guest speakers for the event.

2. Do a raffle:

This is a relatively easy way to make some money. Printing of tickets plus the prize item(s) are your main costs. Players can be the sellers. You will have to apply for a lottery license number in order to legally stage a raffle. This can be obtained from Saskatchewan Liquor and Gaming Authority (SLGA). You have to jump through a few hoops to do this but it is well worth the effort. In addition to your net proceeds generated from the raffle, SLGA has a Charitable Gaming Grant Program that will provide an additional 25 percent of your net sales. So a raffle that nets you \$10,000 is actually \$12,500 if you register with liquor and gaming. Football Sask runs a Grey Cup raffle every year so you may want to work with them. In addition to selling tickets, put your army of players to work. Bottle drives, meat or orange sales, garbage pick up, rock picking a farmer's field, are a few of the many things a large group of eager youngsters could work for.

3. Go to the business community or service clubs in your area:

The Kinsmen have donated large amounts of money to local minor football over the years in Saskatchewan. Like others, they see the benefit in having tackle football. Have local businesses get involved by selling naming rights to teams or to the title of the league. They get exposure while making a big investment in the community. Do not limit your reach to local businesses. Provincially based national companies can be a great source of funds.

A \$10,000 donation to a very worthwhile cause would barely dent their bottom

line but would be a huge boost to yours. With the high profile football has in this province and the benefits it brings to communities, most new leagues have had little difficulty in finding corporate support.

4. Game day sales:

Having a canteen and a 50/50 draw at games can be an ongoing source of funds once you get going. This is not a huge money generator but every little bit helps along the way. Remember you can run a 50/50 through liquor and gaming for the bonus on profits.

It may be difficult to get volunteers for game day. What some leagues have done is request three cheques from parents at the beginning of the season; one for league fees, one for an equipment deposit (destroyed once equipment is returned), and one for failure to do off field work. If parents want to work for the team in some capacity then that cheque will be destroyed. Be careful with using this approach when starting up a league as parents may be turned off by this.

5. Making up T-shirts:

T-shirts with your team logo and colors is a small money maker but a big advertiser in your community. Do not underestimate how important communication between kids is for growing your program!

Facilities

Another item on your to do list is to find an appropriate field for practice and competition. If there is a high school team in you area, you should be fine. Work out a schedule that works for all teams using the field. Most communities have fields that are used for other sports so you will have to work with the city/town and other users of the facility to ensure it is modified to suit everyone. Football requires a fairly large field. A 12 man football field is 110 yards long, 65 yards wide and has 20 yard end zones. The requirements for nine man ball are 100 yards long, 60 wide, with 10 yard end zones. Six man uses a 100 yard long, 40 yard wide field with 10 yard end zones. If there is no field available it will be a challenge to get started. Going to the municipality or to local businesses for grading or sod may help you get a proper field. It will take a growing season to get the fields ready to play so a temporary field will be necessary. Again safety is a factor here as you do not want kids playing in a field with broken glass or gopher holes all over the place. Your goal should be to develop a special facility that is a source of pride for your players and community alike.

Goalposts and a scoreboard are two items to be included for the football team. These items will have to be priced out and included in your budget.

Coaches

Finding qualified football coaches can be a difficult task. In smaller communities there is often only one coach and he is in charge of the high school team. In larger centers there is usually high numbers of registrants which puts a strain on coaching resources. With the popularity of football in our province there should be a few guys in your area that have played some football. If there is a high school team there should be plenty of alumni to help out. The right coach(s) is critical to the success of your program. In addition to the committee they are the one who has to sell the football "culture" to your community. They need to have a passion for the game. Kids will see this and become passionate about the game as well. There has to be a fun atmosphere (especially at this age) where all players can learn the basics and get a chance to play a variety of positions. Remember, kids are your best advertisers to grow your program.

As mentioned before, safety is a big issue and for the uninitiated having good coaching is very important. Football is a very technical game and in order to block, tackle and take a hit, it needs to be taught properly to lessen the chance of injury. Most leagues require their head coaches to have a minimum of a level one training in the National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP). Football Sask has a coaches clinic every April as well as NCCP clinics before the fall season begins. It is a good idea for your coaches to attend one of these, especially if they have limited football experience. Try to work this cost into your budget as it may be a disincentive for volunteers to pay out of their own pocket.

Officials

You will have to find referees for your home games. When joining a league look to the officials already in place for assistance. Nearly every region of the province has at minimum one or two qualified officials. There is always a need for referees so if there are some former players who are passionate about the game, try to encourage them to attend one of the clinics around the province. Football Sask can tell you when these will take place. Minor games normally have four or five refs per game and each are paid around \$20.

One of the big issues in retaining refs is the respect factor. Your team or league should have a zero tolerance policy toward referee abuse by coaches, players or parents. Minor ball is a developmental league not only for coaches and players but officials as well. All will make mistakes. It sets a terrible example for our kids if a coach is berating the refs all the time and it is bad for football in general. We are not as bad as some sports in this regard but we need to create a culture of respect for referees in every league and it starts with the minor system.

Final Thoughts

Starting a football team is no easy task, but in life nothing worthwhile ever is. The impact you can make on the children in your community is incredible and when you see your team take the field for the first time it will all seem worth while. There will be tough times but remember you are not totally alone. Use the talents on your committee and delegate whenever you can. Football is played in many communities across the province and many great people who have started a team or league would love nothing more than to share ideas with you. Football Saskatchewan is your guide to contact these people. Not everyone is a football expert but encourage people to get involved in off field roles. Football is such a great game and if people see you are committed to the program and “for real” they will come out to be part of the effort - parents, coaches and players.

This has been noted earlier in this document but it is critical to nurture and support a football culture in your community, especially if there is no history of tackle football. Being well organized, properly funded, having quality uniforms and equipment, passionate and qualified coaches and a good playing field will ensure your program will be a success over time and be something that people want to be a part of.

Welcome to the great sport of football!



